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Town Board member calls for a raise — for the Town Board

by Tim Gannon | 12/10/2015 5:44 PM

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Fresh on the heels of an Empire Center report that said that Riverhead Police salaries are 30 percent higher than the state average, and a Newsday report that ranked Riverhead's police chief as the highest paid employee in Suffolk County in 2014, Riverhead Councilman John Dunleavy is calling for a salary increase for some employees on Howell Avenue: himself and the rest of the Town Board.

At Thursday's Town Board work session, Mr. Dunleavy submitted a draft resolution that calls for all elected officials in the town to get a cost of living increase annually in an amount not less than the Consumer Price Index.

These salary increases would be effective for 2017.

"Where the heck did this come from?" Supervisor Sean Walter asked as he read the resolution.

"It came from me," Mr. Dunleavy said. He added that Town Board members have not received a raise in six years.

"Everybody says this is the poorest town in Suffolk County or on Long Island, yet our supervisor is the highest paid supervisor in Suffolk County," Mr. Dunleavy said.

"No, I'm not," responded Mr. Walter, whose annual salary as supervisor is \$115,148.

Mr. Dunleavy then produced a list of Long Island supervisors and mayors and their salaries from Monday's Newsday article — though missed the fact that Huntington Supervisor Frank Petrone surpassed Mr. Walter's salary.

"I didn't set my salary," Mr. Walter said.

Mr. Dunleavy said Riverhead has the lowest paid council members.

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"Well, I'll vote against it," Mr. Walter said of the resolution calling for annual raises. "If you can get three votes (on the Town Board), go ahead."

The supervisor said Riverhead doesn't have the lowest paid council members either, citing Southold Town.

Southold has Town Trustees who make about \$19,000 and town Council members who make about \$34,000. Mr. Dunleavy said Riverhead's board members handle the functions of both a councilperson and a Trustee.

Riverhead's council members earn \$48,955, although Councilwoman Jodi Giglio makes \$47,598 because she declined to take a raise several years ago. Town Board positions are technically part-time jobs, while the role of supervisor is a full-time one.

A quick check of 2016 budgets of Long Island towns shows that two other towns pay their council members less than Riverhead.

Southold Council members make \$34,390 per year and Shelter Island's make \$37,704.

The highest is Islip, at \$77,200.

Mr. Dunleavy said board members can refuse the raise if they don't want it.

Councilman Jim Wooten was the only other board member present Thursday, as Ms. Giglio and Councilman George Gabrielsen were absent. He said, "that gallon of milk and loaf of bread costs more than it did eight years ago, yet you're taking on the same money ... I'm just saying, I can understand why legislators do that."

"Do you think we deserve it?" Mr. Walter asked Mr. Dunleavy.

"I think we deserve it," Mr. Dunleavy responded. "Some people are going to hate me, and some people are going to like me."

Next year's Town Board will have three retired town police officers who, in addition to collecting salaries, will also be earning pensions. According to the Empire Center's SeeThroughNY.com, Mr. Dunleavy earned a \$34,285 pension this year and Mr. Wooten earned \$45,556. Mr. Hubbard retired this year; his information is not on the website.

Mr. Walter agreed to let the resolution go to a vote Tuesday, and predicted it would be a story in Newsday.

The supervisor said the reason the Huntington supervisor's salary, along with those of supervisors and mayors in Nassau County, is so high, is because they have these type of annual cost of living salary increases built into their budgets.

The issue is expected to come up for a vote at Tuesday's board meeting, which starts at 7 p.m. in Town Hall.

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